

analysis

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All the troubles of man come from his not knowing how to sit still. — PASCAL

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Let Nature Try It

THE followers of both Karl Marx and Henry George will violently reject the observation that these thinkers, in spite of their opposite theories and conclusions, fell into an inconsistency that makes them kin. The followers, likewise, suffer from this logical lapse; and when we examine the ideas of other famous searchers in the science of society, we find this to be a common failing. I can think of only two—Herbert Spencer and Albert Jay Nock—who kept clear of it.

THE starting assumption of all who delve into the social history of man, in search of an explanatory principle, is that the direction of social behavior is determined by forces which are impervious to human will. Even those who reject "natural law" as an unprovable hypothesis, reason as if there were such a thing; for the mind always seeks a fixed and supersensuous yardstick by which to measure the accidents of life. So we assume, since we cannot prove, that there is a "nature of things," consisting of "laws." These "laws" are inexorable and amoral—they just keep rolling along. The only thing man can do is to observe their operation and apply them to his objectives; he prospers if he does, and he gets into trouble when he is ignorant of, or deliberately ignores, the "laws of nature."

That is the basic assumption of both scientist and philosopher. The scientist is satisfied to find the "laws" so that he can apply them to his tasks; he is interested in the inflexible principles of mechanics because by them he builds bridges. The philosopher, on the other hand, speculates about the world of "laws." He wants to know the whys as well as the ways of them. Up to the present writing, no philosopher has reached the end of his speculation, except by running off into the "nature of things," or, as many of them put it, "the will of God." While atheistic Marx would be horrified to learn that he too took refuge in this mysticism, the fact is that his theory of dialectic materialism emerged from the same intellectual method that brought forward St. Augustine's "City of God." Did he not say that Socialism is bound to come "with the inexorability of a law of nature"? He was, in fact, a mystic of the first water, for he made man a mere pawn in the clutch of his fatalistic "law." Human will could in no wise interfere with the coming of the millennium.

George also pinned his faith in "natural law"—even unto the "will of God." But there was nothing fatalistic about his conclusions for he recognized the factor of free will. The affairs of men are in a sense, he said, simply because men are ob-

livious to the teachings of nature. If men put their minds to studying the "laws" of human relations, and behaved accordingly, they would come to that harmony which nature always demands. In our knowledge of economic law, particularly, we are about as deficient as were the medical men in the tenth century who ordered husbands to eat more so that their wives' labor pains might be eased. The "laws of nature" take no cognizance of human ignorance or perversity.

Social reform is not to be secured by noise and shouting; by complaints and denunciation; by the formation of parties, or the making of revolutions; but by the awakening of thought and the progress of ideas. Until there be correct thought, there cannot be right action.—Social Problems.

Thus, both George and Marx made "natural law" the starting point for their speculations, though they were at opposite poles as to their conclusions. And now comes the inconsistency above mentioned. If the "law" is impervious to the will of man, it would seem that no urging on his part can make it operate faster or in any particular direction. That is, reform is useless. Yet, both Marx and George were strong for reform. They proposed action programs which assumed that, contrary to their basic premise, men could take the "law" by the scruff of the neck and hurry it along. As is frequently the case with men, they reasoned one way and acted another. They believed in "natural law" and yet lacked faith in nature's capacity to work out her program. A brief look-in at their respective theories is necessary to show up this inconsistency.

Historical Fatalism

MARX found his "law" in history. Every society of which history tells us, he maintained, produced institutions which reflected the going mode of production. It was the way tribesmen made a living that determined their social habits; feudalism was likewise a product of that particular economy; capitalism came because of the development of machinery and exchange. In each society there arises a class that enjoys the fruits of other men's labor. This inequity is the result of the political power grabbed by the ruling class; that is, the State. Friction necessarily arises, which is liquidated in a realignment resulting from the introduction of new methods of production. The

new class distinctions brought about by the new methods, always abetted by political power, make for a new conflict which again causes an explosion when still newer methods reach a given point in development.

Capitalism is the latest mode of production to come on the historic scene. It too is doomed to destruction, and all because of an inherent weakness. That is its profit system. By this trick the owners of capital acquire possession of all production above what is necessary to keep labor alive. The owners cannot possibly consume all of this "surplus value," and when they look for markets, domestic or foreign, in which to dispose of this burdensome accumulation, they run into other capitalists who are in the same predicament. In the ensuing competitive contest the larger capitalists swallow up the smaller. The proletarian class thus grows by accretions from the capitalistic class.

This inevitable concentration of capital makes Capitalism in time a top-heavy structure, ready to topple over at the first good push. Meanwhile, the lot of the workers becomes progressively worse. When desperation reaches the proper point (Marx is not specific in fixing it), the workers will revolt. The revolt will prosper because the historic moment will have come. At that time—Marx expected to be on hand—the proletariat will be quite prepared to take over, for "it will be disciplined, united, organized, by the very mechanism of the process of capitalistic production itself." The "expropriators will be expropriated," and then, of course, the State will disappear. The final synthesis will be Socialism, the State-less society.

IT is not the province of this article to question either the logic of Marx or the facts he adduced in support of this "law." The point is that he claimed inevitability for it. It "executes itself," he said. Men cannot prevent, delay or accelerate the process. "New higher methods of production," he insisted, "never appear before the material conditions of their existence have been hatched out of the womb of previous society."

But Marx lacked faith in his own "law." He was not willing to let it work out its inexorable ways, but went in for political action, for revolution and all manner of civil disturbance, so as to hasten what he said could not be hastened, the transition from Capitalism to Socialism. His followers, of course, are not without plausible explanation for this inconsistency. They would be in poor case without an explanation, not only for the sake of Marx, but also to give names to their hysteria. But, if you take Marx at his word,

The Natural Order

George went to work on this "law." He agreed that rent must rise with every increase of production, but nature did not decree that this increment should accrue to private owners. On the contrary, his study of the facts led him to a different conclusion. He pointed out that production rises as men learn how to cooperate through specialization, competition and exchange. But, the necessary condition for such abundance is population. Detroit could not be Detroit without its million and a half population, and Capitalism could not have developed without a marketplace. Where people congregate and cooperate there the fund of wealth grows, and it is on the sites they occupy and use that rent settles. Then he observed another phenomenon. In those centers of population the need for certain overall services appeared, and the need became greater in proportion to the size of the centers. A small village would find a sewerage system a burden, while a super-highway becomes a necessity in New York. From this correlation of population, production and rent, George drew his conclusion: nature intended that this rent be applied to defray the cost of these overall community services. The diversion of rent to private pockets is in con-

How does it come that rent is privately appropriated? George goes to history for his answer. The institution of private property in land—the essence of which is not use, but the collection of rent—is a man-made affair. It came by way of conquest. As Spencer put it, all title deeds to land are based on force or fraud. Hence the private appropriation of rent is a political scheme and is without warrant in nature. The scheme is kept in force only by support of the State. And the State is made possible by its appropriation of production through taxation; this, George maintains, is in direct violation of nature's decree. In the nature of things man has a right to what he produces, every bit of it, and this right is not invalidated by the State nor is the taking sanctified by the name of taxation.

Logically, then, the only thing man can do in the circumstances is to undo what he has done; he can work toward the abolition of the State through the abolition of taxes. He cannot *bring about* the "law" which George observed, since that is of the "nature of things." If this "law" has the quality of inevitability, the refund will surely find its way into the public coffers and be used for social services, once the man-made impediments are removed. To draw on an analogy, the soil will bring forth foliage once the sun gets to it, and if you want foliage you have only to remove the structure which impedes the rays of the sun.

GEORGE, however, was not satisfied to let it go at that. He went in for doing something for the "natural law." How? Through the use of that State power which he recognized as an evil institution. That is the anomaly. Repeatedly he said that no good end could come of evil means, and yet he was for using the State to bring about his "natural order." He would reform the State into virtue. He would use political power to destroy it. And, even though he brilliantly preached understanding of the "law" as the necessary condition for its application to human affairs, he made use of a slogan as a convenient substitute for understanding, and his "single tax" took its place with "dictatorship of the proletariat" in the arena of confusion.

THESE are some social philosophers who maintain that politics itself is "in the nature of things." They too have a "law," namely, that man is by nature a

If there is a "law" of social progress, then the only positive thing man can do is negative: remove the man-made impediments. Taking them all together, these impediments are political, operating under the aegis of the State. If this institution were abolished, by the simple expedient of starving it to death, then nature could show her hand. Thus, if her dictum is that man's happiness lies in abolishing private property, then that would come about and Marx will have been a true prophet. If, on the other hand, she decrees that the rent-fund be used to defray the expenses of the community, and private property in labor products must be inviolable, then George will have seen the truth.

Of course, there may not be any immutable "law" governing human relations in that case, even God cannot help man in his search for harmony. For, in that case the only true prophets should be those who say "we can plan it," and they have been tried aptly and have always been found wanting. The human heart yearns for something more positive, the human mind keeps searching for a guiding principle. It might be well, then, to give up on politics altogether, to throw all man-made plans overboard, and let nature try it.

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